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# NIMH Panic Disorder Campaign Focuses on Recognition, Treatment

Some 3 million Americans suffer from occasional panic attacks. Without warning, they develop an intense fear and experience rapid heartbeat, shortness of breath, profuse sweating, and dizziness. In short, they feel as if they are about to die—although their physicians can find nothing physically wrong.

Another 3 million people in this country have panic disorder—they suffer four or more panic attacks per month or have had at least one attack and are terrified of having another. Approximately one-third of the people with panic disorder develop agoraphobia, a condition of fear that can keep them confined to their homes.

Despite the fact that panic disorder is highly treatable, most Americans know little about the illness. In a poll of 1,000 adults in October 1991 commissioned by the Anxiety Disorders Association of America, 76 percent of those polled had heard of panic attacks, and 33 percent had heard of panic disorder—yet many confused the two or at least regarded them as synonymous. Six out of 10 erroneously believed the attacks came about as overreaction to daily stress and could be dealt with by people “getting a grip on themselves.” Nearly three-quarters did not think the condition could be treated medically.

Actually, panic attacks and panic disorder are different conditions that do not necessarily come from stress, and panic disorder can be treated by psychotherapy or medication or both. Because of ignorance, many people are not receiving treatment. There is a need for increased awareness—by both the general public and health care practitioners—about panic disorder, its symptoms, and the treatments available. For that reason the National Insti-

tute on Mental Health (NIMH) of the Public Health Service has launched a 3-year public information campaign.

According to Alan I. Leshner, PhD, acting director of NIMH, the goal of the campaign is to increase the likelihood that people with panic disorder are properly diagnosed and treated.

“With appropriate treatment, as many as 90 percent of people with panic disorder can be relieved of the repeated and unexpected bouts of overwhelming fear that characterize this illness,” said Leshner at a news conference kicking off the campaign.

Because panic symptoms mimic those of heart disease or other life-threatening conditions, they may sometimes be misinterpreted. Often, a panic disorder patient remains undiagnosed and untreated for years while visiting as many as 10 physicians for costly and extensive tests.

“This endless series of visits to the doctor adds to the patient’s distress,” said Leshner, “and puts further demands on our already overburdened medical system.”

“As we’ve seen from the poll statistics, panic disorder is often misunderstood or perceived to be trivial,” said Leshner. “But thanks to ongoing research, there is good news for people with panic disorder. Highly effective treatments are available, and improvement is usually seen in about 6 to 8 weeks.”

Leshner said the challenge facing NIMH is to get the “good news” to those who need to hear it: first, to people who have panic disorder and don’t know where to seek help, and secondly, to health care professionals such as family practitioners and emergency care physicians, who typically

are the first contacts for people with panic disorder.

Rachel Freed, a woman who suffered from panic disorder for more than 15 years before it was correctly diagnosed, gave personal testimony at the news conference. Since she began treatment, Freed has progressed from having at least four panic attacks a month to having only one in the past year.

“I’m here today because I want people to know that you can survive this disorder—that you can get help and you can get better,” said Freed.

Underpinning for the public information campaign came from a panel of experts convened by NIMH and the National Institutes of Health. The panel concluded that certain medications and therapies are highly beneficial for persons with panic disorder and urged a national educational effort to inform health care professionals and the general public about panic disorder.

Throughout the course of the campaign, NIMH will be working closely with health care professionals, mental health voluntary organizations, and general and specialized media to distribute public service announcements and other materials on panic disorder.

—CARREE VANDER LINDEN, *Public Affairs Specialist, Office of Scientific Information, NIMH.*

*Free copies of a new flyer on panic disorder written for a general audience can be obtained by writing to NIMH, Office of Scientific Information, Information Resources and Inquiries Branch, Room 15C-05, 5600 Fishers Lane, Rockville, MD 20857, or by telephoning toll-free 1-800-421-4211.*

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